

West Virginia Executive Branch Privacy Tip of the Week

E-mail Lives Forever

Question:

My boss told me to be very careful about the kinds of things I put in e-mail. I'm pretty tactful already – what do you think she's talking about?

Answer:

E-mail is a great tool. It enables information sharing across an organization, but it also creates risk. Many times, people forget that e-mail creates a written record and has a very long lifespan. There are always multiple copies of e-mail messages on our systems, and you must assume that your email messages are never totally deleted. Many agencies are even required to keep copies of all messages for a number of years.

Given the extremely long lifespan of e-mail messages, it is important to consider the content of your messages very carefully. Every e-mail you write could wind up being read by unexpected people or even used in court. You should always try to keep your messages clear and professional. Also, make sure you do not exaggerate or overstate issues as well.

According to a National Public Radio report, here are some words and phrases that you should avoid using in e-mail unless you are certain the context is clear:

- stupid
- huge mistake
- dumb
- can't believe
- serious trouble
- unsalvageable
- shocked
- speechless
- too late
- uncomfortable
- I don't think we should
- very sensitive
- highly sensitive
- do not share this
- just between us

These words may not seem inappropriate by themselves but these are the words that investigators use to search e-mail archives for evidence of misconduct or suspicious activity. If you are communicating something that warrants these phrases, you might want to discuss the matter with your manager before sending the email! To read the full report, <http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127829646>